

# ARTS EDUCATION

## Big Sky Arts Education

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### Can our classrooms become beehives of creativity?

In early March I attended the Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) Cultural Symposium on Creativity and Innovation in Public Education, co-hosted by the California Arts Council. The event was a convening to address the growing interest in creativity and innovation as a solution to some of the challenges of K-12 public education. It was impressive company with some of the field's most distinguished researchers and thought leaders.

Our keynote speaker at the opening dinner was renowned architect Frank Gehry, revered around the world as a "Big C" creative – somebody born with inherent creative genius.

That's the way most of us think about creativity, right? Creativity is something you are born with, and something you can recognize in children in a classroom setting, and label. This child is creative, just look at her drawings! This child, not so much – stick figures, nothing novel about that. Oh well, maybe he or she is good at sports.

During the symposium panel discussions, a few researchers turned the idea of creativity as an attribute that individual people possess on its head. First came Dr. James Haywood Rolling Jr., an associate professor at Syracuse University, who boldly asserted in his opening remarks, "There are no orphan imaginations."

Dr. Rolling has studied the natural phenomenon of swarm intelligence and applied it to creativity in the learning process. Swarm intelligence is the collective behavior of decentralized, self-organized systems – like bees in a hive. He posits that creativity is also a social behavior, where the collected experience and information shared by the participants generate ideas. Ideas don't come from the one or two most creative people in the room, but from the collective energy, experience and knowledge each individual brings to the group.

Edward Clapp, a doctoral candidate from Harvard's Project Zero, also advocates for the idea of creativity as a social behavior by stating that no act of creativity can take place in isolation. He argues that the education system is holding on to the idea of the individual as the creative one, labeling some students as creative while others are not.

**Cultivating creativity in the classroom will require policymakers to see creativity as a skill to be developed, just like math or reading. Creativity is something you do, and you can get better at, not something you are or aren't.**

The majority of schools believe that creativity is a fixed capacity, instead of a skill that can be taught. Clapp believes that creativity should be seen as an experience for students that should happen through learning in groups, and not as something that an individual student is or has.

Creativity as experience! The implications of Dr. Rolling's and Edward Clapp's idea of shifting creativity in learning from an individual attribute of children who are "Big C" creative to a group participatory process are huge, both for arts education policy and educational access in our schools. Imagine classrooms where all students are honored as makers, creators and innovators, because it is ideas that get labeled as creative and not children. That's by far the most exciting idea that came out of the symposium.

What would it take to make this happen? It is a paradigm shift in thinking for educators and policy makers. It requires that teachers, especially arts teachers, set aside their judgment about who is creative and who is not creative in the classroom setting, and design opportunities that shine a spotlight on all

the students, not just the ones who are most evidently talented.

We will also have to reinvent classrooms and the way teachers teach in order to release the creativity that too often remains locked up in our heads, to paraphrase Dr. Rolling. Our classrooms will have to become more project-based, with the teacher becoming less an expert and more a learner, exploring complex questions alongside the students.

It will also require a re-balance of power between teachers and students, because, as symposium participant Dr. Robert Bilder pointed out, "creativity exists on the edge of chaos" and we tend to dislike chaos in our classrooms. In the kind of creative learning environment Rolling and Clapp are advocating for, learning is loud and messy and students have much more voice than we are sometimes comfortable allowing them.

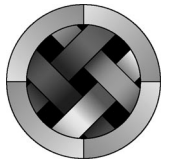
It will also require education policymakers to see creativity as a skill to be developed, just like math or reading. Creativity is something you do, and you can get better at, not something you are or aren't.

And, if it is indeed a skill, teachers will also need help developing this skill in themselves in order to feel comfortable teaching it through high-quality professional development.

At the end of the long symposium day, we got a sense of the kind of creative space Rolling and Clapp are advocating for when we toured Frank Gehry's studio, an experience that surprisingly reinforced the idea that creativity is less about the "Big C" and more about a social process. Gehry does not work in isolation, and he has designed his studio to make sure that the 120 or so people who work there feed off the collective energy and imagination of everybody else who works there.

The studio is one large warehouse with few walls or doors, organized by project rather than hierarchy. It is literally filled with models from floor to ceiling, because their process is to make a model of every single idea, in multiple scales, until the building is ready to be built. A beehive of making, creating, problem-solving and non-stop collaboration. It was after 5 p.m., and nobody was packing up to go home.

Imagine our classrooms like that when the bell rings – nobody getting up to go home, everybody too busy making. A beehive of creativity that all students experience together.



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### A Shared Endeavor

Recently, a coalition of twelve national organizations led by the State Education Agency Directors of Arts Education (SEADAE), called on policy makers and the public to re-examine support for quality arts education in a document called Arts Education for America's Students, A Shared Endeavor.

According to SEADAE's press release, A Shared Endeavor defines what quality arts education looks like at the local level, encourages partnerships, and calls on organizations and individuals to actively support and promote:

- Policies and resources for arts education;
- Access to arts education for all students;
- Collaboration between school-based arts educators, other subject area teachers, and community-based artists and arts educators; and
- Long-term advocacy partnership between all providers of arts education.

Download the pdf at [seadae.org](http://seadae.org).

## Teresa Heil named Montana Art Educator of Year

Teresa Heil of Wolf Point received the 2014 Montana Art Educator of the Year Award from the National Art Education Association. This prestigious award, determined through a peer review of nominations, honors an outstanding member from each state or province whose service and contribution to art education merits recognition and acclaim. The award was presented during at the NAEA National Convention, March 29-31 in San Diego.



Teresa Heil

"Teresa Heil exemplifies the highly qualified art educators active in education today: leaders, teachers, students, scholars, and advocates who give their best to their students and the profession," said NAEA President Dennis Inhusen.

Heil has spent 12 years developing a comprehensive K-12 art program at Frazer School, one of Montana's Schools of Promise, located on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation. She facilitates numerous culturally relevant school beautification projects

each year and hosts quality enrichment programs. She is also an adjunct instructor at Fort Peck Community College.

Heil holds a master's in fine arts and education from The University of Montana and received her BFA in art education from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

She is currently creating a model Indian Education for All visual arts lesson for the Montana Office of Public Instruction. View Frazer School's online gallery at [www.artsonia.com/schools/Frazer2](http://www.artsonia.com/schools/Frazer2).

NAEA is the professional association for art educators. For more information about the association and its awards program visit [www.arteducators.org](http://www.arteducators.org).

## Assessing the educational impact of a field trip

By Sean Fenton  
WolfBrown.com

A recent study on the educational value of museum field trips may provide a model for assessing other types of arts exposure in school settings.

The study, published in EducationNext by researchers from the University of Arkansas, identified significant gains in knowledge retention, critical thinking, tolerance, historical empathy, and future interest in art museums among K-12 students who went on a field trip to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, versus a control group that did not.

The study further showed different levels of impact among subgroups – namely, that this particular field trip had the most impact on students from low-income and rural areas, as well as the very young (i.e., students who were least likely to have had a similar cultural experience prior) ...

Conceivably, this framework for measuring educational impacts can be adapted to any arts-related intervention, such as group visits to theatre performances, visiting school assemblies, teaching artist residencies, and programs for learners of all ages.

Because we know the educational impact

of a work of art can differ widely based on who receives it, school-based educational programs can utilize this kind of research to fine-tune the design of their programs, as well as their messaging strategies.

Arts programs of all kinds might be wise to embrace this approach to impact assessment as a valuable way to reflect on goals, improve programming, and report success.

Sean Fenton is the manager of WolfBrown's Intrinsic Impact program and a Bay Area artist with roots in educational theatre and theatre for young audiences.